

Dear Friend,

Do you think that our government would ^{ever} allow a computer to start a nuclear war? Do you think the Federal government, or large corporations, are collecting vast computer databanks of information on American citizens that threaten your privacy and our concept of democracy? Are you aware that the government is now pursuing the development of an entirely new generation of fearsome weapons based on "artificial intelligence," or computers, that will kill human beings on their own, without human direction or supervision?

You probably know that I have had some experience with the government's plans for nuclear war, and with government secrecy and invasions of privacy. I'm sorry to say that many of the problems I have been fighting for twenty years are still with us—the danger of nuclear war, the prospect of a "Big Brother" government, or the insane, continual development of new weapons that will leave a legacy of terror to our children.

But I'm feeling encouraged by the work of an organization of people who understand these problems and who are taking steps to build a better future—an organization called Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, or CPSR. I'd like to tell you a little about CPSR and ask you to support their very important program.

There's a stereotype about computer professionals in the press and on TV that they care only about their machines, or their computer games, and that they frequently break into other computers and cause a lot mischief. But of course most

computer professionals are just like you and me, concerned and responsible citizens with a passionate hope that their work will be used to help people build better lives.

Computers are a powerful technology, and they're unquestionably changing our modern society in profound ways. Some people say we're living in a "computer revolution," similar to the Industrial Revolution of the last century. Computers are changing the way we work, the way we travel, the way we do business. They're changing the very nature of government too--most of us vote using computers, and the government itself would be paralyzed without the millions of computers it uses.

You know that computers can make some crazy mistakes--like the stories in the newspapers in which a dog gets a letter from the Selective Service, for example, or some person suddenly finds the telephone bill is in nine figures. You may have experience with computers at work, and you know they can be temperamental machines, even though most of the time they're pretty useful.

What if the computers we use in the command and control of our nuclear arsenal experience an error? It's happened before, many times in fact. Usually we have enough time to figure out that a computer error is just a false alarm. But the U.S. is deploying first-strike nuclear weapons that have to be used in shorter and shorter time frames. That puts enormous pressure on commanders to make decisions faster, and to use computers more. If we build the "Star Wars" system, we'll have to turn over all the control to computers because decisions will have to be made in seconds. In a political crisis, when the safety checks start coming off our nuclear arsenal, an ill-timed computer error could plunge the world into nuclear holocaust, producing the most empty and pointless end to human civilization that we can imagine.]

But this is madness, you say. It's crazy, irresponsible! You're right! But this is what our government is doing with computers, and it's taking a lot of hard work by Computer

[Professionals for Social Responsibility to try and reverse this trend and to return us to some prudence and sanity.

There have been a lot of examples recently that our own government is prone to distrust American citizens. What does the government do with all the information it is collecting on you and your family? What are your rights to privacy? How can you prevent large corporations from collecting and storing information about you, information that you can't see or inspect or change?

Computers make collecting and storing information about people very easy and cheap. The result is that there are mountains of information collected on everyone in the U.S. We are producing what someone has called "the dossier society," which constrains your freedom and violates your privacy.

Millions of people who work with computers now are routinely "watched," not by a supervisor but by their computer—"the boss that never blinks." The computer "watches" their work and compiles lists of data about the worker's performance—the computer can compute how long you've been in the bathroom to nine decimal places.

? Different places here in the U.S. and overseas are experimenting with computerized roads, with computers, sensors, and television cameras watching drivers for speeding, or for billing on toll roads. What if a corporation or a government agency could watch you and your family in your car wherever you decide to go?

Computerized scanners in grocery stores and other shops can provide a database of customer preferences, so that somewhere in the country a computerized database is forming an "opinion" about what you like and what companies ought to try and sell you. The technology is available for watching and recording almost everything you do.

Computer technology can be used to make life simpler, easier, more productive, and safer. It can also be used to make life

more oppressive, more sterile, more constrained, and more hazardous. Who makes the decision about which way to go? Shouldn't the public be involved in making important decisions about how computer technology is used in society?

Many people in the public think that talk about computers is reserved for experts, because average citizens get lost in the jargon of computers. But the people in CPSR believe that the issues are not so complicated, and in fact are usually just common sense. What has to happen, however, is to convince people that they can get involved in shaping how our society uses computer technology.

CPSR is the country's only public interest organization of high technology professionals who are concerned about how computers are affecting society and the future. It's a small organization now, but it has a tremendous impact because of the members' hard work and dedication. The work of CPSR is done by volunteers, and they do research, write papers, articles, and books, speak to the public, testify in Congress, and hold public meetings, all in order to educate the public and policymakers about the proper use of computers.

For example, CPSR published the first independent analysis of the computing aspects of the "Star Wars" program, which turns out to be the Achilles heel of that system. CPSR helped defeat a proposal by the FBI that would have created a computerized method of tracking individuals in the United States. CPSR is leading the fight against what are called "autonomous weapons," a frightening new development that would introduce weapons capable of killing human beings based on decisions made by computers instead of people.

CPSR publishes a quarterly newsletter famous for its substantive articles on computers and society. The organization has books, papers, and videotapes available for getting out the message about responsible computing. The 20 CPSR chapters in the United States have public meetings about subjects ranging from accidental nuclear war to the use of computers in elections to computing in the Soviet Union. The organization is

alive with bright, concerned and highly educated people who are optimistic about what the future holds.

CPSR needs your support. And it deserves your support. Think of the children of today and tomorrow. We can leave them a world of nuclear terror on a computerized hair-trigger, with a computerized state and economy that control all the details of life, a world with deadly weapons triggered by computers—in short, all the features of some of today's darkest movies. If we simply allow things to take their course, these developments are likely to come about.

But if we take the future into our own hands, we can build a world that values peace, justice, privacy, freedom, and human dignity. We can build technologies that promote these values instead of rolling over them. And we will leave our children the prospect of a much more hopeful life, filled with promise and opportunity instead of fear and mistrust. This is what CPSR is all about, and I'm happy to be telling you about their work and purpose.

Won't you take a minute to join CPSR, or send them a check to support their essential work? I know there are a lot of causes competing for your attention and support, but this really is one of the most important, and even a small contribution would help them out a lot. There's a postage-free envelope enclosed to make it easier for you to give them a hand.

Thanks a lot for your attention to this appeal. The leaders of CPSR have asked me to thank you in advance for your support. Best regards from all of us.

Sincerely,

Daniel Ellsberg